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ABSTRACT

A study explored through personal narratives of 12 self-proclaimed feminists the kind of feminist leadership that emerged in 1993 when a women's center emerged in a small conservative midwest college town. These 12 volunteers who were mandated to make the collective vision a reality included 11 Euro-American and 1 Mexican-American women, well-educated and from the middle class. The life histories focused on historical and biographical circumstances in which the women who started the center began to identify themselves as feminists. Through storytelling, they invented pictures of their identities revealing life patterns of resistance, desires for social and personal transformation, strong senses of place, and feelings of spiritual location. Their narratives of self-transformation often invoked the dominant cultural ideologies of their time and then proceeded to transcend them in various ways as they tried to arrive at a clear picture of their "feminist education." Their stories contained instances in which they were powerful or powerless depending on the contextual situations imposed upon them. The diverse personal and evolving perspectives revealed that although the 12 believed they were feminists, their individual journeys were unique personal transformation. They proclaimed liberal notions, but their status of privilege sheltered them from really knowing oppression and gave them only glimpses of the realities of poor women and women of darker colors. (Contains 14 references) (YLB)

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Feminist Life Stories: Twelve Journeys Come Together at a Women's Center

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Abstract: This study explores the personal narratives of twelve self-proclaimed feminists who started a women's center in a small conservative mid-west town. Our common "herstories" are not identical but reveal learning experiences imbedded in our social and cultural contexts. These social and cultural contexts, however varied, held common threads of the pedagogies we experienced in formal and informal settings. These pedagogies held traditions that are often passed on without question because we are not always aware of their presence. The stories allowed us to reflect on the traditions in our lives in order to come to terms with our past and present realities. As we each learned to be girls, women and feminists, we accepted the rewards of connection and acknowledged the struggle for self-definition. This research chronicles the learning journeys we each took as we came of age in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

This study began in 1993 when a women's center emerged in a small conservative college town in the mid-west. On a sunny September Saturday in a church basement, about twenty-five women gathered to share their dreams of a women's center. There was a mutual understanding of our collective knowledge that was revealed through our use of particular language and rituals to express our desires. Our methodology, though never formally named, was participatory and non-hierarchical. We did not pretend or claim to express the entire collective complexity of our unique individual experiences but through listening and collaboration we all felt nurtured. It was an implicit expectation that each person feel comfortable and that each of us be able to resonate with the sentiments that were ultimately expressed in a creative draft of a mission statement. The final statement contained drawings, poems, and words to convey deeply felt ideals and values.

Twelve volunteers left the church that day with the creative collage of words and pictures, destined to be our mission statement. We had the mandate of the group to make their collective vision a reality. We were eleven Euro-American women and one Mexican-American woman, well educated – seven masters degrees and five doctorates, women of privilege from the middle class. We were the new Board of Directors of a yet unnamed organization dedicated to establishing a space for women in our small enclave. Eight of us were primarily heterosexual and four of us were primarily lesbian. We ranged in age from 32 to 54 and we represented the careers of social worker, professor, counselor, psychologist, teacher, minister, student, consultant and mother. The development of our public voice was made easier by the fact that five of us had worked together on different projects over the years that had sought to improve life in our local community (Belenky, 1997, p. 9). We were all familiar because we shared an elite culture including language, education, and experience.

The membership reached 200 by the end of the first year; there was a building, a newsletter, a series of programs, and a strong commitment to the educative purpose embedded in the mission statement.

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The mission of the Women's Center is to create a safe, supportive environment that celebrates women, promotes women's culture, and encourages the empowerment of women. We shall also work towards the elimination of sexism and other forms of oppression; particularly those based on race, national origin or color, class or economic status, sexual orientation, age, physical characteristics, or spiritual belief. (DeKalb Area women's Center{DAWC}Adopted January 1994)

We wanted the women's center to be where individuals craft a sense of learning based on forging critical relationships with themselves, with others and with the world. We realized that the women's center was a small attempt to build community where learning is based in part on some of the life affirming and transforming experiences Mechthild Hart (1992, p. 213) asks us to give attention to: joy, pleasure, passion, creativity, art, and ritual. We wanted women to feel a certain freedom, along with a welcoming, nurturing warmth when they entered our portal. There were women's cultural events, a lending library, classes or workshops on topics of interest to women, a coffee shop atmosphere for women to meet in and rental of space to other community organizations. Art, music and performance quickly gained prominence in our schedule. As a result of a regional women's choral festival that we hosted our first year, a local chorus emerged by the name of "Bread and Roses". A new artist displaying works in many media transforms our on-stage gallery each month. A dance troupe from New York City has been in residence twice with workshops to coincide with a performance at the University. Finnish folk singers and unknown playwrights have used our space to extend their craft to the community. The Frida Kahlo Fiesta brought the whole neighborhood to our doorstep with a Marriachi Band playing into the humid summer night. The Ballet Folklorico of Mexico performed and shared a meal with the community in our hall before going on to the University.

It has been a little over five years since that first meeting in the church basement and the viability of the building and the organization is still debated. As with any young organization there are waves of involvement and commitment. The original twelve board members still wander in and out of the center's existence, serving on teams, offering advice and volunteering for different activities. Giving birth to an organization is much different than sustaining it. The life stories of these twelve women, who were not afraid to call themselves feminists and start an organization with a controversial mission, form the basis of my research.

Methods and Procedures

The initial purpose of this study was to explore through personal narratives the kind of feminist leadership that emerged in a small conservative mid-west town. To accomplish this task I collected the life stories of these "natural female leaders" who created a "small community where individual strengths are nurtured with emphasis on consensus and cooperation" (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997). The center celebrates what Belenky and her colleagues call the female styles of leadership that flourish around kitchen tables and in church basements. Tables and basements is where we developed the bylaws of our new organization, where we held meetings and many of our first workshops and potlucks before we became tenant/owners of a building. As the interviews unfolded it became evident that it was important to document the process, the journey to feminism that we each took as we came of age during the first decades of the women's movement in the United States. My assumptions did not include a vision of a

smooth ride to selfhood. The rich emotions, contradictions, and triumphs of the journey became the focus of the research. The importance of the study is not based on our uniqueness but what we share with other women in small towns across the country and the world. Our lives provide a small narrow window to the wider society where we live, grow, and interact (Hugo, 1996, p.38).

The significance of the collective life histories was to focus, as Sue Middleton (1993) did in her dissertation, on the historical and biographical circumstances in which the women who started the center began to identify themselves as feminists. I am not only the author of this study but also one of its subjects. It is a dual role I have been living since 1993. Even before we crafted the mission statement I let everyone know of my intention to chronicle our process for my dissertation. They all knew my theoretical orientation and I let them know of insights that emerged as I analyzed their life histories. Each woman supported me in my efforts and encouraged me to complete the research. They have cared and nurtured me in their own unique ways and celebrated the evolution of my topic. There was a spirit of collaboration and I felt that each and every story was truthful and valid. As Sue Middleton expressed it (1993):

> Part of my thesis relied on people's descriptions and analysis of what had happened to them in their families and schools. It was possible for a woman to have been wrong in her interpretations of past events—for example, her mother's expectations, feelings or motives or a teacher's prejudices. However, these adult memories and interpretations were accepted as valid because the central concern in the study was not the events themselves but the interpretations the women made of them and the importance the women attached to these interpretations in their becoming feminists...(p. 68)

The interviews were long conversations with friends. They took place in living rooms, around dining room tables, and in big chairs in a sun drenched office. One interview was conducted in a coffee shop bakery and they all involved sipping and sometimes eating. There was nothing sterile about the encounters and comfort was never a concern. I had a steadfast commitment to confidentiality and I changed names and places to preserve it. There were no time constraints placed on the interviews and I let each person speak for as long as she wanted; most talked for three hours. No one needed much prompting to begin telling her story. I've always known that listening is one of my strengths and each narrative was a joy to receive. I felt honored to be let in on such fascinating lives with such reflective commentaries. According to Belenky (1997) and her fellow researchers this is quite consistent with the type of communication patterns that women develop "that emphasized listening and calls forth a highly collaborative dialogue" (p. 268).

Feminist Stories of Privilege, Resistance, and Learning

Through our storytelling we have invented pictures of our identities revealing life patterns of resistance, desires for social and personal transformation, strong senses of place, and feelings of spiritual location. Our narratives of self-transformation often invoke the dominant cultural ideologies of our time and then proceed to transgress or transcend them in a variety of ways as we try to arrive at a clear picture of our "feminist education". The introspection reveals how we each came to the feminist notion that women are oppressed and how that belief often becomes personal political practice. Through our resistance we attempt to struggle against social

forms of oppression and we are transformed if and when we can fuse our political perspectives with our practice (Lewis, 1992). As we began to mature and gain an understanding of organized social practices and interests beyond ourselves we each tried to decide how to guide our intervention for the aim of social change and the eventual demise of inequality. Our collective insights at the women's center were theoretically sound but our alliance with all oppressed people from our privileged perch, did not, as Ellsworth(1992), Min-ha(1986/87), Gentile(1985) and others have noted, exempt us from confronting our ability to become the oppressor. It was Patti Lather (1992) who asks us "How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the dominance".

We are twelve well-educated middle-class women of privilege, but even our privilege when viewed through a feminist lens is not constant. In our stories there are instances where we are sometimes powerful and at other times powerless depending on the contextual situations imposed upon us. Researchers have shown that women are "simultaneously constrained and empowered by class and gender variables as they struggle to translate their education into collective action" (Hugo, 1996, p. 28). If it's not safe to be who we really are then the safest place to resist the hegemony and carefully reveal our resistance is in our stories and narratives. It is difficult to be a feminist in a conservative town where traditional, socially formed gender differences are rarely challenged and even more difficult to be a lesbian because sexual orientation is never mentioned without great emotional outbursts. Yet even when our privilege is challenged there is still refuge in our class and carefully constructed comfort zones.

In learning feminism, we struggled to unlearn key assumptions and assertions (Ellsworth, 1992). The society and culture where we reside construct these assumptions but never freely offer the tools to change or challenge them. Our stories are seldom if ever ours alone because they represent layers of meaning and interactions that can be subject to multiple readings. Our narratives are "unfinished, imperfect, limited, and partial...but we should read and critique them because they hold implications for other social movements and their struggles for self-definition" (Ellsworth, 1992). Even though we each claimed to be feminist, underneath each of our voices was a "teeth-gritting" and "often contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ideology" (Ellsworth, 1992).

The diverse personal and evolving perspectives reveal that even though the twelve of us believed we were feminists, our individual journeys were unique personal transformations. As women of privilege we shared an elite culture including language, education, and experience. We had a common ground from which to begin a quest, even though each person represents multiple communities of practice with complex commitments. Through our art exhibits, plays, cultural events, and celebrations we conveyed our belief in the human dignity and equality of all people. According to Simon (1992) we were looking to construct a "pedagogy of possibility, one intended to enhance the expression of human dignity and secure the renewal of life on our planet" (p. 151). We desired change, even if it was not tumultuous and instantaneous change. The gradual eventual changes in mindsets lend credence to the power of one individual and the ultimate power of many voices over time. When people use their collective voices and take action based on shared beliefs, then the change can be realized. Once again we found ourselves making critical assumptions that beg for evaluation. We naturally assumed because of our idealism that we could be emancipatory and try to create diversity by degrees...one little step at a time. The language of possibility was part of our middle-class lexicon. We knew that women

have combined music, dance displays, art, readings, videos, theatre, workshops, and leisure in "imaginative modes of defiance: a weaving together of diverse learning moments toward the creation of a new sensibility" (Welton, 1993, p. 159). The new sensibility was our goal because it meant that we did not intend to be spectators but rather accept the responsibility inherent in the meaning we had ascribed to our past and present heritage (Simon, 1992, p. 153; Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea 1997, p. 224). Belenky (1997) and her colleagues would call our organization a "public homeplace" because we were committed to fostering the development of people and our community.

> "...'public homeplaces' are places where people support each other's development and where everyone is expected to participate in developing the homeplace. The members go on working to make the whole society more inclusive, nurturing, and responsive to development needs of all people—but especially those excluded and silenced." (p. 13)

Critical reflection on our process, our assumptions, our knowledge, our mission, our actions, and ourselves is an important component of the women's center. It is a constant struggle for us to confront privilege and work through it, acknowledging the contradictions in our lives. It is during times of reflection when some of us were able to gain critical insight and understanding of our privilege and acknowledge the dominance of white heterosexual, able-bodies, middle-class women. We were able to open ourselves and the center to the voices of working class, lesbian, non-white, varied abilities, and two-thirds world women. Plays, workshops, art exhibits, videos, and discussion groups formed the critical media for communicative action. We also became dedicated to the notion of accessibility for the center. We wanted every woman to see herself reflected in our programs and in our space. We believe that local struggles can contribute to positive social change. We believed that we were nudging social change a little further along a path guided by our mission.

The critical issue that the life histories reveal is found in what they do not disclose. The fact that even though we proclaimed liberal notions, our status of privilege sheltered us from really knowing oppression and gave us only glimpses of the realities of poor women and women of darker colors. We attempted academic solutions by sponsoring workshops on race and class issues and then wondered why we were the only ones who came. Our class, race, and gender dictated what we "saw as worthy of study and action" (Hugo, 1996, p. 39). Our ways of speaking and styles of discourse were products of our social location. Our successes have been when we've opened the doors to the whole community with cultural events involving families, music, dance, and especially food. Instead of woman to woman, these events were people to people. We weren't just providing uplift for the white middle class. Without knowing it, we were borrowing a tradition of the National Association of Colored women's Clubs (1896) whose motto was "Lifting as We Climb" (Davis, 1990, p. 4). Imbedded in this motto is the principle that the uplifting must "guarantee that all of our sisters, regardless of social class, and indeed all of our brothers, climb with us" (Davis, 1990, p.5). We are always learning and asking critical questions so that we don't reproduce those structured silences in our community that we can't see clearly through our privileged eyes.

Conclusion and Implications

I think that research should represent a beginning as well as the culmination of an important endeavor. Over the past five years people have been looking to me to ask the critical questions and chronicle our experience at the center. Whenever we reached a point of group consciousness, several women would look at me and say, "this story must be told". In completing this research I fulfilled the wishes of the women with whom I spent countless hours working to craft something special for women in our community. In telling our story I added to the collection of voices of women in various enclaves around the world. In accordance with the spirit of the "pedagogy of possibility" (Simon, 1992) the life histories seek to understand our presence in both historical and cosmic time. This research is important because we have "traditions with no name" (Belenky, 1997) that need to be documented. We don't know enough about how some women are transformed into feminists. The journey is not stagnant and probably never finished.

I hope to take what I learn from this study and see if similar or diverse voices are nearby or oceans away, to see if historical experiences can cross cultural boundaries and yield similar experiential transformation. I would very much like to study women's communities to see if collectively we have a message for adult educators, community organizers, and feminists. Learning from our narratives can only help the global efforts of women's struggle for justice. We do not see our efforts as extraordinary but we do recognize the strength of our collective actions for change. I would like to take what I learn from this research and see if other women's communities have similar stories. The goal is to share what we learn with others and never give up.

"When all women lift, the mountain will move." (Auluck-Wilson, 1992)

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